

THE HEDGE OF THORNS AND THE PLAIN WAY

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A SERMON
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AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.

*“The way of the slothful man is as a hedge of thorns: but the way of the righteous is made plain.”
Proverbs 15:19.*

YOU must have noticed how frequently godly people almost wear out their Bibles in certain places. The Psalms, the Gospel of John, and parts of the Epistles, are favorite portions, and are thumbed in many an old believer's Bible till the fact is very noticeable. There are certain sheep-tracks up the slopes of Scripture which are much more trodden than the rest of the holy fields. I suppose it has always been so, and I will not quarrel with the instincts of the saints.

I do, however, regret that any portion of Holy Writ should be neglected. There are Bible readers who keep clear of the historical parts of Scripture, and also greatly avoid the Book of Proverbs; indeed, they almost wonder how Proverbs and Ecclesiastes came to be a part of the Word of God. Very singular it must seem to them that this Book of Proverbs should be placed so very near to Solomon's Song—that sacred canticle, which is the center and climax of inspired Scripture, a book which I do not hesitate to call “the holy of holies”—the innermost sanctuary of divine love. Concerning that deeply mystical, mysterious, and rapturous canticle, it would be impossible to speak too highly, it is, indeed, the Song of songs—a song, however, which none can sing but such as are made songsters by God Himself, by partaking of the inspiration, not of the fountain which gushed from Mount Parnassus, but of that fountain of every blessing which flows from the mount of everlasting love. It is certainly remarkable that, hard by such a deeply-spiritual Book there should be placed the Book of Proverbs, which mainly consists of instructions for this life. Doubtless there is a meaning in that arrangement. The Lord would not have the highest spirituality divorced from common sense. God has made us body and soul, and He would have us serve Him with both. There is a part of us that is material, and there is a part that is spiritual, and both need guidance such as the Holy Spirit affords us in the inspired Book. The Lord Jesus Christ has redeemed us, not as to our soul alone, or our spirit alone, but as to our body also, and He would have us recognize this fact.

While we are in the world we are not to regard ourselves as if we were pure spirits, having nothing to do with earth, but we are to look to our lower nature, and our earthly surroundings, and order all these in accordance with the will of the Lord. It is not enough that our hearts are cleansed; our bodies are to be washed with pure water. We are in the world and we must eat, and drink, and work, and trade, even as other men do, and all this must be as much brought under the rule of wisdom as our higher nature and its actions. The Christian's faith does not come to him merely to create holy raptures and heavenly emotions, but it comes to help him in the business of every day.

Grace is intended to sanctify all the relations of life. There is no necessity that a man who is wise unto salvation should in other respects be a fool, but the reverse should be constantly seen; sanctity should beget sagacity, and purity should be the mother of prudence. We are to make the common things of this world sacred to God, so that the bells of the horses may be as truly “Holiness unto the Lord” as was the miter of the consecrated priest who served at the altar.

I pray my friends not to be so spiritual that they cannot do a good day's work, or give full measure, or sell honest wares. To my disgust I have known persons professing to have reached perfect purity who have done very dirty things. I have been suspicious of superfine spirituality since I knew one who took no interest in the affairs of this world, and yet speculated till he lost thousands of other people's money.

Do not get to be so heavenly-minded that you cannot put up with the little vexations of the family, for we have heard of people of whom it was said that the sooner they went to heaven the better, for they were too disagreeable to live with below.

As the religion of the Lord Jesus Christ is meant for this world as well as for worlds to come, so the volume of Holy Scripture is fitly made to contain Proverbs as well as Psalms. I have been told, but I do not know how true it is, that Scotland owes very much of its practical shrewdness to the fact that the Book of Proverbs used to be printed in a small form, and was one of the first books read by all the children at the public schools. I can only say that, if it were so, it showed much wisdom on the part of those who made the arrangement, and I have no doubt that if it were so still, it would be a clear gain to the rising generation. It is a right thing to have practical teaching in connection with sound doctrine, and common sense in conjunction with deep spirituality. Let the Gospels, and Psalms, and Prophets, and Epistles be your bread, and let the Book of Proverbs be your salt. Neglect neither the one nor the other.

I preach at this time from the word of Solomon which is now before us, and I shall not withhold from you its everyday meaning, but I shall also exhibit its higher lights, for I believe that there is not a moral truth in the Book of Proverbs which does not also wear a spiritual aspect. I shall try to show you that our text, while it has its temporal bearings which we will not conceal, has beyond these its higher and spiritual teachings, with which we will conclude.

I. First, then, take THE TEXT IN ITS TEMPORAL BEARINGS. It runs thus—"The way of the slothful man is as a hedge of thorns: but the way of the righteous is made plain."

Note then, first of all, that *a slothful man is the opposite of a righteous man*. In the text they are set in opposition. "The way of the slothful man" is placed in contrast, not with the way of the diligent man, but with "the way of the righteous," as if to show that the slothful man is the very opposite of being a righteous man. A sluggard is not a righteous man, and he cannot be, he misses a main part of rightness. It is very seldom that a sluggard is honest, he owes at least more labor to the world than he pays. He is guilty of sins of omission, for he fails in obedience to one of the laws laid upon manhood since the fall, "In the sweat of your face shall you eat bread." He aspires to eat his bread without earning it, he would, if he could, eat bread for nothing, or eat the bread for which others toil, and this verges upon coveting and stealing, and generally leads up to one or both of these sins. The sluggard evades the common law of society, and equally does he offend against the rule which our apostle promulgated in the church, "If any would not work, neither should he eat." The sluggard is not righteous, for he does not render to God according to the strength lent to him, nor to man according to the work assigned him. A slothful man is a soldier who would let others fight the battle of life while he lies under the baggage wagon asleep, until rations are served out. He is a farmer who only farms his own strength, and would eat the grapes while others trim the vines. He would, if possible, be carried on his bed into the kingdom of heaven; he is much too great a lover of ease to go on pilgrimage over rough and weary ways. If the kingdom of heaven suffers violence from others, it will never suffer violence from him. He is too idle to be persistent, too slothful to be earnest.

He cannot be a righteous man, for slothfulness leads to the neglect of duty in many ways, and very soon it leads to lying about those neglects of duty, and no liar can have a portion in heaven. Idleness is selfishness, and this is not consistent with the love of our neighbor, nor with any high degree of virtue. Every good thing withers in the drought of idleness. In fact, all kinds of vices are comprehended in the one vice of sloth, and if you tell me that a man is a sluggard, I have his whole character before me in the blackest of letters. His fallow fields are well adapted for evil seed, and no doubt, Satan will raise a fine crop of weeds in every corner of his life. What this world would have been if we had all been gentlemen, with nothing to do, I cannot tell. The millions that have to work are largely kept out of mischief by their toil, and although crimes are abundant enough in our great city as it is, what would they have been if there had not been daily tasks to keep men from excessive indulgence in drink, and other forms of evil? Without labor the ale-houses would have been crammed every one of the twenty-four hours, folly would have held unbroken carnival, and licentiousness would have burst all bounds. Among the sanitary and salutary regulations of the moral universe there is none much better than this—that men must work. He who does not work is not a righteous man, for he is out of accord with that which makes for righteous-

ness. In some form or other, with either brain or hands, by working or enduring, we share the common labors of the race appointed them of heaven, and if we are not doing so, we are not righteous. I call to your remembrance the remarkable words of the Savior, "You wicked and slothful servant." Those two adjectives are nearly related—"wicked and slothful." Might not our Lord have said "slothful" alone? He might, but He knew how much of wickedness goes with sloth, and is inherent in it, and therefore, He branded it with the condemning word.

Our second observation is this; *if we avoid sloth we have not done enough, we must also be righteous*. If it had been sufficient to shake off idleness, and become industrious, the text would have run thus, "The way of the slothful is as a hedge of thorns: but the way of *the diligent is made plain*." Ah, dear friends! A man may be very industrious, and energetic, and earnest, but if it is in a wrong cause, he might have been less mischievous had he been slothful. To be exhibiting industry by doing a great deal of mischief is not commendable. To be actively disseminating your opinions, if those opinions are false, is to be doing grievous harm. To rise up early, and sit up late, and to eat the bread of carefulness, merely for selfish ends, is not to secure a blessing. There is a diligence which is produced by greed, or ambition, and this is no better than the selfishness which is the cause of it. Many wear themselves to skin and bone to gather that which is not bread, to hoard up that which can never satisfy them. We are to become the servants of righteousness when we escape from the servitude of sloth. "Not slothful in business" is very well, but to complete the change we must be gracious in our diligence, being "fervent in spirit, serving the Lord." We must do that which is right, and kind, and holy, and so we must live to the honor and glory of Him to whom we owe all things.

Young men who are beginning life, it is well that you should be urged to be diligent, but it is better that you should be led to be righteous! Worldlings would have you industrious, but saints would have you righteous. You can be made righteous in state through faith in Jesus Christ and righteous in character through the renewal of your heart by the Holy Spirit. Mind this.

The text leads us to make a third observation, which repeats its very words, namely, that *a slothful man's way is like a hedge of thorns*. Here we enlarge. The idler's way is *not a desirable way*. Unthinking persons suppose that the sluggard lives a happy life, and travels an easy road. It is not so. Many believe in "the sweet doing of nothing," but it is a sheer fiction. Surface appearances are not the truth, though it may seem that idleness is rest, it is not so; though sloth promises ease, it cheats its votaries. Of all unrest there is none more wearisome than that of having nothing whatever to do. The severest toil is far more endurable than utter sloth. I have heard of retired business men going back to the counter from absolute weariness of idleness. It is far more desirable to be righteous than it is to be at ease. Labor of a holy sort has ten thousand times more joy in it than purposeless leisure.

The way of the sluggard is also *difficult*. The idle man walks a hard road in his own apprehension; he has to break through thorns. Every molehill is a mountain to him; every straw is a stumbling block. There is a lion in the way; he will be slain in the streets. You look out, and can only see the smallest possible dog, but he is sure that it is a roaring lion, and he must stay at home, and go to bed. He cannot plow by reason of the cold. The clods are frozen, he is sure, they are hard as iron and will break the plow. If you look out of doors, you will see the neighbors' teams going, but he has another excuse if you beat him out of the one he has given you. The difficulties that he sees are created in his own mind by his natural sluggishness, but he has such a creative faculty that he has always twenty arguments against exerting himself once. The first thing such persons do in the morning, when they open their window, is to look out, and see a difficulty. Whenever they are sent about a task, or on an errand, they straightway begin to consider the great labor that will be involved in it, the imminent risk that will surely come of it, and the great advantages of leaving it undone. To the slothful man, his way, when he gets so far as having a way at all, always appears to be as hard to pursue as a hedge of thorns, and mark you, if he continues slothful, it will actually become a hedge of thorns. Difficulties imagined are apt to arrive. Duty neglected today will have to be done some time or other, and the arrears of neglected service are grim debts. The slothful is like the spendthrift who does not reckon what he spends, but contents himself with crying, "Put it down." The score increases, and again he cries, "Put it down." He resolves to do better, and then gives a bill, or renews a former bill, and dreams that the debt is paid. But the debt remains, ac-

cumulates, and follows the man's track. Old debts pursue a man. Like wolves which hunt the fleeing traveler across the snowy plains of Russia, neglects and obligations follow a man with swift and sure pursuit, and there is no way of escape. It is the past which makes the present and the future so difficult. The sluggard's way appears to lie, not only over a thorny brake, but over a compacted mass of thorns, of set purpose planted for a hedge. Dear friends, do not put off till tomorrow that which can be done today. Keep the road clear of arrears. Do the day's work in the day. I am persuaded that, in your ordinary business work, some of you Christian people need to be warned against shiftless delay. Believe me, there is a piety in keeping your work well in hand, in having the house right, the business in order, the daily task well done. True religion seeks to honor God in all the transactions of life, and this cannot be done by idling, by postponement, and by allowing work to run behind. No sluggard can be a saint; no sluggard can glorify God. Life grows hard and unenviable to men who try to make it easy. A man who neglects his duty, whether he is a carpenter, a bricklayer, a clerk, a minister, or an archbishop, will find his way increase in difficulty until it becomes almost impassable.

Before long, the sluggard's course becomes *a very painful way*, for a way of thorns tears a man's garments, and wounds his flesh, and you cannot be neglectful of the ordinary duties of life without by and by suffering for it. Loss of character, loss of position, and actual need, all come from idleness.

Continue in that course and you will find your way become a hedge of thorns in a further sense, for *it will be blocked up altogether*. You will be unable to go on at all. You took it easy once, but what will you do now? You neglected duty, you refrained to do the service of the day, and at last your sins have found you out; nobody will have you, and you are a burden to yourself. Now have you found a hedge of thorns in your way. This is clear enough, and it has been seen by most of us in actual life in several cases.

The other truth of the text is equally clear—*a righteous man's way becomes plain*, "The way of the righteous is made plain." When a man, by the Holy Spirit's gracious influence upon him, is made thoroughly truthful, thoroughly honest, so that he walks in his integrity, it is most pleasant to note how soon, by some means or other, his way opens up before him. We have seen good men in great straits and adversities; their own conscientiousness may appear to narrow their course, and of course the depressions of business fall upon righteous men as much as upon the unrighteous, but in the long run you will see that, if a man keeps straight, and walks in strict integrity and faith, the Lord will make darkness light before him, and crooked things straight. Ask the aged man of God, whose life has been full of grace and truth, and he will tell you that, though he was brought low, the Lord has helped him. He will interest you with his account of the struggles of his younger days, and how, when he had his large family of little children about him, he was tempted to do a questionable act, but was enabled to hold fast his integrity, and found in his steadfastness the way to success. Those stories, which some of us heard as boys at our father's fireside, or which our grandfathers told us before they were taken up to heaven, are, to some of us, heirlooms, treasured as tokens for good, and proofs of the faithfulness of God. We know that integrity and uprightness are the best preservatives. If we will not put forth our hand unto iniquity even during the worst pinch, we shall come forth as the light. But if in trouble you try to get out of it by indirect means, you will involve yourself in tenfold difficulty. It is far better to be poor than dishonest, yes, it is better to die than to dishonor our profession. It is God's business to provide for us, and He will do it. We are not to be too fast in providing for ourselves. We must not command the stones to be made bread, by forestalling the Lord in that which is His own peculiar province. Remember our Lord's answer to the tempter, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." We shall dwell in the land, and verily we shall be fed, but how this is to be accomplished is the Lord's business rather than ours. "The way of the righteous is made plain." Only wait and watch, and you shall see the salvation of God.

Thus I have set before you the moral or temporal meaning of the text, commending it earnestly to the consideration of all, especially of men of business, begging them to see to it that there is no neglect about any part of their calling, for a Christian's business ought to be the best done of any man's in the world.

Look to it also that there is no swerving from righteousness in anything that you do, for the safest and surest road is the way of truth, the path of righteousness. If you keep close to God, and make Him your guide even unto death, you will have no need to trouble yourself about your way—the Lord will make it plain.

II. Now I come to THE SPIRITUAL TEACHING OF THE TEXT, and may the Lord anoint our eyes by His Holy Spirit, that we may see!

Take the first side of the text, *the spiritual sluggard; what is said of him?* His way is “as a hedge of thorns.” I gather from the opposition of the text that the spiritual sluggard’s way is the way of unbelief, because the opposite of his way is the way of the righteous. Now, the way of the righteous is the way of faith—“We walk by faith.” Therefore the spiritual sluggard’s way is the way of unbelief.

I will describe him. He has a way, for he is not altogether dead to religious matters. He hears sermons, and attends the house of God. He sometimes reads his Bible, and he often has a correct notion of what the gospel is. But he fails in faith, he has not faith enough in the truth of the things which he professes to believe ever be affected by them in his daily life, or in his truest feelings. If he did really believe these things to be true, his life would not be slothful. When a man believes that there is a hell, he labors to escape from it. When a man verily believes that there is a heaven, unless he is demented, he has an ambition to partake in its glories. When a man really and truly accepts the fact of his having sinned against a righteous God, and believes in the evil of sin, he pines to be cleansed from sin. When he heartily believes in the power of the precious blood of Christ to make him clean, he seeks to be washed therein, that he may be pure before the sight of God. The spiritual sluggard does not believe after that practical fashion. He says, “It is true,” but he acts as if it were false. He is too much a sluggard to become an infidel; he is too lethargic to argue against the truth which condemns him; he nods assent, it is the nod of sleep. We might have more hope for him if he would begin to contradict. If he would think enough of the truth to endeavor to justify his unbelief of it, we might hope that he had opened one of his eyes, but while he continues to cry “Yes; oh, yes,” and to do all that is proper, but nothing that is decided and earnest, we have small hope for him. He prays at times, but it is a dreamy devotion. He has not faith enough in prayer to continue in it till he is heard in heaven. He listens to the preaching of the gospel, but as a sluggard he lets what is said go in one ear, and out the other; he grasps nothing, feels nothing, retains nothing. He is often on the verge of some good and great thing, but it ends in smoke. He has resolved in real earnest to look to his eternal state, and seek the Lord with all his might, but his resolves are frail as bubbles. If you were to tell him that in seven years’ time he would be just as dull, stupid, and sinful as he now is, he would angrily deny it, but such will be the case. He intends only to delay a little longer, and then he is going to entertain the great question in the most serious manner. If I recollect rightly, he was in the same mind twenty years ago, and I fear he will continue in the same mind when death comes upon the scene, and ends all his dreaming. I fear that of him it will be true, “in hell he lifted up his eyes, being in torments.” He will not open his eyes till then.

I must not forget that this sluggard did once make an effort. He gave up one of his vices, that is to say, he almost did so, but he soon returned to it. He was a drunk, and he went the length of not drinking quite so much. Perhaps he even went so far as not drinking at all, which was a good thing for him, but then he made up for his self-denial in that direction by indulgence in another way. If you cannot sink a ship by a hole in one place, you can do so by boring a hole in another; while some go down to perdition by one sin, others destroy themselves by another. The sluggard spent all his strength in tinkering one breakage, and he had no energy left to mend a second flaw. He was so much asleep that he murmured in his dream, “Well done! I am a splendid fellow.” Even when a friend shook him, he yawned, and turned over, and went to sleep again. He was almost awakened, but he preferred to doze till a more convenient season. He heard a sermon the other day upon “One thing you lack,” and he cried, “That’s me!” and slumbered again. He heard a discourse upon judgment to come, and he at once admitted the absolute need of being prepared for death and judgment, but he did not prepare, and in all probability he will die in his sins. The man has no resolution, no soul for action, no spirit for anything good. He is given up to slumber; he pleads always for a little more folding of the arms to sleep. He will, he will; he assures you that he will wake up, but he never does. Oh, that by the grace of God this dreamer could be awakened!

His way is the way of unbelief, and he keeps to it with a deadly persistence which must end in destruction.

Now, that way is full of thorns. *It is a very hard way.* I will show you in a minute that it is so. People who are in this state cannot quite give up religion, and yet they have never really taken to it. Do you notice how hard everything is to them? To begin with, ministers always preach such dreadfully long sermons. The sermon is not long to you who feed upon the word, but to those who sleep at the table it is intolerably tedious. The whole service is dreary to them, though to believers it is bright and happy. And Sundays! To me the Sabbath is the pearl of the week, but to these sluggards in religion it is a day of gloom. We hear them speak of “dreary English Sundays.” They piteously describe the closed shops, and theatres, and museums, and inquire what a man is to do in so sad a case. To go to church? To hear of the best things? This is much too hard a task for sluggish minds. Poor dear souls! As for a prayer meeting, they never condescend to consider such a gathering, it is too dreary. Or if perchance they go, nobody ever prays to please them; their ideal of devotion is not reached. Ask them whether they read the Bible at home. They might do so if they were fogged to it, but the Bible does not interest them, and it requires so much thought, they cannot muster mind enough for it. To us it is a Book which sparkles with the most divine truth; it is the Book of God; the Lord of books; there is no volume like it. But to these people, Bible reading is hard labor, and worse. Prayer also is slavery; repentance is impossible. The revival plan of “Believe, and live,” without any repentance—they rather take to for a time, till they begin to understand more of what the evangelist means.

They go into the inquiry room, and get “converted” in five minutes, and have done with godliness for the rest of their lives. Possibly some time after they hear of a sanctification to be had in the same manner, they believe themselves to be perfect, and feel that there is no more need for watchfulness or striving, for sin is dead, and they are perfect. When they are told what repentance and faith really are, and that these are for daily, life-long use, and that we must every day watch and strive against temptation, without and within, they disappear from among our hearers, for they do not wish to trouble themselves with so great an enterprise. If they could be carried to heaven in a sedan chair, or trip there in their slippers, they would be glad of it, but to go on pilgrimage, up hill and down dale, is another matter. Their way is as full of difficulties as a thorn-hedge is full of prickles.

Moreover, it is *full of perplexities*. Do you ever meet with these sluggards? I do. They sometimes come to see me, and when they come, this is their style of talk. They say, “Well, sir, I have heard about believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. Can you tell me what it means?” I explain that it is a simple acceptance of God’s testimony, and trust in the Lord Jesus. Do you understand *that*? They say, “Yes.” Then they raise a difficulty, which I explain. Do you quite comprehend *that*? “Yes, sir, I see that, but”—and then follows a further doubt. This also is cleared up in time to make room for another. Again and again it is—“Yes, but then—.” Thus I continue grinding wind by the hour together. Their minds are bottomless buckets, and their memories are bags full of holes; it is very unprofitable work to endeavor to fill them. I seem to be trying to catch a fox. I stop up its hole, but it is out at another opening. This also I stop, and fifty more, and to my surprise, I hear the shout, “Hark, away! My fox has gone across country.” He is further off than ever; it was great folly on my part to imagine that I could bring him to earth, or dig him out of his burrow. These people are great at questions, the whole difficulty really lying in their unbelief—they are unwilling to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. When a man does not wish to believe, reasons for doubting gather about him in swarms, like flies. Besides, it is such a fashionable thing, you know, to doubt. You are aware that all the cultured folk display great facility in fashioning doubts, while those who believe God to be true, and do not mistrust His word, are common-place persons of a very low order of mind. You smile, but this is a very convincing argument to our sleepy friend. No great logic is needed to lull a sluggard to repose. It is the fashion to doubt, and you may as well be dead and buried as out of fashion! These sluggish people will not take the trouble to sift evidence; they have no wish to be driven to turn from their sins, and seek a Savior, and be reconciled to God; this would be too much exertion, and involve too many self-denials and heart-searching. They prefer a way full of perplexities to the new and living way; they choose a thorn-hedge rather than the King’s highway of righteousness.

Nor is this all. In addition to perplexities, their way becomes *full of miseries*. The sermon which pleases the believer, and cheers his heart, saddens the sluggard. The prayer, which is to us a delight, is to them a cause of anxiety, if they enter into it at all. The sight of bread is a great joy to a hungry man, but suppose he does not eat it, and there it stands—well then it becomes an instrument of torture fit for Tantalus to use. I should suppose that nothing could aggravate thirst much more than the mirage of the desert, when the traveler sees a stream of bright, sparkling water rippling at his feet, and yet not a drop is there. His fancy torments his thirst. So, for some of you to hear of the feast of love, and to see the joy of the children of God, must be horrible, if you yourselves have neither part nor lot therein. That promise quoted by the preacher, how it must have grated on your ear, if you knew its value, and yet did not embrace it by faith! Painful is this predicament. You are sadly placed, for you enjoy neither good nor evil. If you were to go straight out into the world, and plunge into the pleasures of it, you would, at least, know one side of life, but you dare not do that, you have too much conscience, too much training in religious ways, to run with the worldling in his wantonness; so that you neither know the pleasures of the world, nor the pleasures of grace. You feel restraints from both sides, but you know not the liberties of either side. Between two stools you come to the ground. Neither heaven nor hell is on your side; both saints and sinners are shy of you, and so your way is as a thorn hedge. It is dreadful for a man to have enough conscience to know that he is lost, but not enough grace to find salvation; to have enough religion to make him uncomfortable in sin, but not enough to make him happy in Christ. I know some who continue in sin, and yet at night have terrible dreams, and wake up in a cold sweat of fear. They dare not think of the course of conduct, which, nevertheless, they persevere in; they go onward to destruction, and by and by they will take a leap in the dark, because they are too idle to wake up. O mighty grace, wake these sluggards, or else they will sleep themselves into eternal misery!

“The way of the slothful man is as a hedge of thorns.” One of these days he will come to the end of his way, and he will see that hedge of thorns *blocking him out of heaven*—blocking him out from God. His sins, like a thick hedge, will stand in front of him as he is about to die, and will shut him out from hope, while his despairing soul will cry, “Oh, that I could find mercy! Oh, that I could find deliverance!” Recollection of wasted opportunities, of a rejected gospel, and of despised Sabbaths, will come up before him, and through that thorn hedge his naked soul will be unable to force its way into hope and peace. God grant that we may not be among the sluggards at the end of the way!

We will now consider the other side of the text very briefly, and notice that *the righteous man’s way shall be made plain*. This is a cheering promise, especially to any of you who are walking in the dark at this time. “The way of the righteous is made plain.” The Lord will see to this. The way of the righteous is the way of faith. They see Him who is invisible, and they trust in God. They look for their pardon to the precious blood of Jesus Christ; in fact, they look to God in Christ Jesus for everything. Their way has impediments in it; crooked things are in it, mountains are in it, and deep gulfs, but see the beauty of the promise, “The way of the righteous is made plain.” Difficulties shall be removed, the valleys shall be exalted, and the mountains and hills shall be laid low, the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain. Child-like confidence in God shall march on as upon a raised causeway, and always find for itself a road. Faith travels by an unseen track to honor and glory; neither shall anything turn her aside. Her way may not be plain at this moment, but it shall be made so. God is with those who trust in Him, and what or whom shall we fear when God is with us? In due time, the hand of the Lord shall be seen. To the moment the divine power will time its interposition. The Red Sea was not divided a single second before Israel passed through it. The Jordan only flowed apart when the feet of the Lord’s priests actually came to the water’s brim. Tomorrow’s difficulties are real, and tomorrow’s grace will be real. When tomorrow comes, sufficient unto the day shall be the divine help thereof. When you come to the sepulcher, you shall find that the stone is rolled away from its mouth. In due time the way of the righteous shall be made plain, and that is all the righteous should desire or expect.

Sometimes the way of the righteous is mysterious and perplexing. I have known the best of men say, “I long to do right, and by God’s grace I will not stoop to anything which is evil, but which of the two ways now before me is the right way? Each of them seems to be both hopeful and doubtful; which way shall I turn?” This is a condition which causes great anxiety to one who is deeply earnest to be right. Oh,

for an oracle which could plainly indicate the path! Superstition and fanaticism shall not be gratified by either voice or dream, but yet the way of the righteous shall be made plain. Brother, when you do not know your way, ask your guide. Stand still and pray. If you cannot find the way upon the chart, commit yourself to the divine guidance by prayer. Down on your knees, and cry to the Lord! Few go wrong when they pray over their movements, and use the judgment which God has given them. The last is not to be omitted, for I have known persons pray about a matter which was perfectly clear to anyone with half a grain of sense. In order to escape from an evident but unpleasant duty, they have talked about praying over it. Where a plain command is given, an unmistakable finger points the way, and hesitation is rebellion. Sluggards make prayer an excuse for doing nothing. On the other hand, willful people make up their mind, and then pray, and this is sheer hypocrisy.

God is insulted by prayers which only mean that the petitioner would be glad of divine allowance to do wrong—glad of an event which might be twisted into guidance in a doubtful direction. Such prayers God will never hear, but the way of the righteous shall be made plain. The path of faith shall end in peace; the way of holiness shall conduct to happiness. Your way may be so dark that you cannot see your hand before you, but God will before long make it bright as noonday. At this moment all the wise men in the world might not be able to predict your path, but the Lord will direct you. Only trust in the Lord, and do good, and He will light your candle, yes, He will cause His sun to shine upon you. There is a blessing in the very act of waiting upon God, and out of it comes this joy, that your way shall be made plain.

I find one excellent translation runs thus—“The way of the righteous is a highway.” The righteous do not follow the blind alleys and back streets of craft and policy, “The way of the righteous is a highway,” it is the open road, where none may challenge the traveler. It is the King’s highway, where the passenger has a right to be. It is a grand thing to feel that in your position in life you are where you have a right to be, and that you came there by no trespass, or breaking of hedges, that you are doing what you have a right to do before the living God, and none may challenge you. He that is in the King’s highway is under the King’s protection, and he that stops him by daylight shall come under the strong hand of the law. Our King has said, “No lion shall be there, neither shall any ravenous beast go up thereon.”

He that is on the King’s highway will come to a good end, for the King has completed that way so that it does not fall short, but leads to a city of habitations, whose Builder and Maker is God. Oh, to be right with God; yes, to be right with Him in our daily life and private walk! Let that be the case, and our way shall be judged of by the Lord as His own royal highway, and upon it the light of His love shall shine, so that it shall become brighter and brighter unto the perfect day.

O God of great mercy, keep us in Your fear, and through Your grace lead us, in imitation of Your dear Son, to abide in holiness! And to Your name be praise forever and ever! Amen,

**PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—ISAIAH 35; Hebrews 12:1-13.
HYMNS FROM “OUR OWN HYMN BOOK”—241, 210, 126.**

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